



AGING & DISABILITY RESOURCE CENTER

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The Older American's Act: A History of Support for Seniors

July 2014 Press Release -submitted by Denise Grossman, Elder Benefit Specialist

Since its inception in 1965, the Older Americans Act (OAA) has been the foundation of our national system of home- and community-based services for older Americans. OAA-funded programs — such as home-delivered meals, congregate meals, transportation, employment services, chore and personal care, and legal assistance — help older adults remain in the much-preferred setting of their homes and communities. OAA programs save the government money by preventing unnecessary hospital stays and readmissions, delaying or avoiding costly institutional placements, and promoting efficiencies within the health care system by coordinating care and managing care transitions.

When President Johnson signed the bill authorizing the OAA he said: “The Older Americans Act clearly affirms our Nation’s sense of responsibility toward the well-being of all of our older citizens. But even more, the results of this act will help us to expand our opportunities for enriching the lives of our citizens in this country, now and in the years to come.”

President Johnson’s sentiment echoes through to the present day. In Wisconsin, citizens see the ground level implications of the OAA in both state- and county-led programs and services designed to benefit and help our state’s seniors. For example, the OAA provides some of the funding support for Wisconsin’s Elder Benefit Specialist (EBS) Program — a statewide program that offers counseling, assistance, and advocacy on public benefits, health insurance, and consumer law to people who are 60 or older. Elder benefit specialists (EBSs) are primarily located in county aging offices, which in some counties are part of the human or social service’s department or an aging and disability resource center. Although located in the county aging office, benefit specialists are trained and their casework supervised by attorneys who specialize in elder law and public benefits. The average monetary impact an EBS brings to clients and the community through public benefit eligibility, overpayment resolution, medical insurance appeals, and other positive outcomes is \$1,002,103.59 per year.

In addition, the OAA funds nutrition programs for older Americans, providing a vital health and wellness benefit. Home-delivered meals, in addition to meals offered at community meal-site locations, allow seniors to obtain essential nutritional support, to remain independent, and provide a community support system for Wisconsin’s seniors.

Wisconsin’s allocation of OAA funds also provides education and support for seniors at-risk or the victims of elder abuse. It also funds the long-term care ombudsman program which supports advocates for residents of nursing homes, board and care homes, assisted living facilities, and similar adult care facilities. They work to resolve problems of individual residents and to bring about changes at the local, state- and national levels that will improve residents’ care and quality of life.



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Funding support for the OAA is often the subject of political debate. Recently, 27 senators, led by Senator Bernard Sanders (I – Vermont) delivered a letter to the Chairman of the Subcommittee on Labor, Health, and Human Services and Senate Committee on Appropriations voicing support for increased funding to the OAA. The senators' letter, dated April 3, 2014, stated in part: "Regretfully, federal funding for OAA programs have failed to keep pace with inflation or the growing need, despite the cost-effectiveness of these critical programs. There are few better investments than the OAA programs that millions of older adults rely on for a healthy and dignified life. Investing in OAA services saves taxpayer dollars by reducing premature and costly Medicare and Medicaid expenditures resulting from unnecessary nursing home placement or hospitalizations due to poor nutrition and chronic health conditions."

Approval for the increased funding requested remains to be seen. However, nearly 50 years after its enactment, the importance of the OAA as the binding fabric of the country's aging network and associated supportive services remains certain.